



*Above, an artists rendering of the New Jersey Arts Incubator.
Below, a photo of the building before renovation.*

In West Orange, a dream of nurturing the arts

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Amy Simon envisions West Orange one day having a place where performing artists and aspiring artists of all backgrounds can explore, develop and showcase their skills in a nurturing environment.

She has plenty of support to help move the idea of a performing arts venue from concept to reality. Plans are unfolding for the creation of the "New Jersey Arts Incubator" by next October.

"There is a shortage in New Jersey of such facilities," Simon said of the 99-seat arts center she is in the process of founding at 555 Valley Road, two blocks south of Central Avenue.

"What a business incubator is to business, the New Jersey Arts Incubator will be to performing artists: a place to work, to study, to learn the business of art, a place to launch a product, a place to get an education, and a place to interact with both children and adults," said Simon, who is also a spokeswoman for West Orange.

Supporting Simon is an 18-member board made up of representatives of various artistic disciplines and members of a nonprofit organization involved with neighborhood revitalization projects in West Orange and Orange.

Among those board members who met at the facility Oct. 1 were architect John Winckelmann, jazz guitarist Vic Juris, New Jersey Theatre Alliance executive director John McEwen, Two River Theatre Company operations director Zeke Zaccaro, 12 Miles West Theatre Company artistic director Lenny Bart, New Jersey Institute of Technology multimedia director Kip Rowan, and television director and cameraman Edward Robertson.

They thrashed around their respective ideas on how to make the New Jersey Arts Incubator successful. They agreed that the 25-foot-wide, 14-foot-deep porch of a 1930s-era attached house would be the perfect stage for the performing arts facility.

Once an estimated \$650,000 in grant funding is put in place, the two-story brick structure, on the northwest corner of Valley Road and Hazel Avenue, will be transformed into a place where local, regional and visiting artists can showcase their work, Simon said.

The building is where the former Wagon Train Inc. clothing manufacturer had done business. A second-floor business, the Kasha Fitness Center, is getting ready to move, Simon said.

Right now, a search is underway for a professional regional theater company that would be the incubator's anchor tenant, she said.

"The New Jersey Arts Incubator is a dream come true for me and my husband, Joe," Simon said. She noted how the idea took 14 months to mold into shape.

West Orange plans to establish a community police substation next to the 12,000-square-foot facility.

"As actors, as residents of West Orange, as activists in the valley, the advent of the facility is the culmination of much effort and dreaming," Simon said. "The incubator and the new police substation will truly change the landscape of the valley, bringing with it a cultural center and an exciting and comfortable destination."

Patrick Morrissy, executive director of the nonprofit Housing and Neighborhood Development Services (HANDS), also would like to see the adjoining West Orange and Orange Valley neighborhood transformed into an arts district. "It's going to be the heart and soul of personal expression," he predicted for the New Jersey Arts Incubator and the adjacent area.

HANDS spent \$790,000 on March 28 to acquire the building on Valley Road.

Winckelmann, the architect, said the theater will offer flexible space, with no fixed seating, so portable chairs can be removed and a dance floor area created.

The facility will feature three small offices, three studios, a multi-media studio, a storage area for costumes, props and equipment, a high-end coffee shop, concession stand and wireless Internet cafe, Winckelmann said.

Zaccaro, of the Two River Theatre Company, said performing arts venues such as his in the Monmouth County community of Red Bank fill a community void.

"I'm constantly meeting people who tell me what a great addition this is to the town of Red Bank and the surrounding area," Zaccaro said.

Two River is making a difference with its "presentations, the theater, the music, dance, its availability as a meeting space, and a party space for nonprofit organizations," Zaccaro said. "It's also increased traffic to restaurants and shops. It's had a positive impact on the west side of Red Bank, particularly in bringing more people to the area.

"I think, in time, the (New Jersey Arts) Incubator can become the same sort of magnet for West Orange," Zaccaro said. "I'm happy to see it going up there. I hope they have as much success as I think we're having down here."

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